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ABSTRACT

The purpose of the focus group design described in this paper was to identify the needs of students in English-as-a-Second-Language (ESL) programs for use by researchers, program designers, and teachers. The pilot focus group consisted of students from various programs who were preparing to take the Test of English as a Foreign Language. They were asked to conceptualize the ideal ESL course. Despite the cultural diversity within the pilot focus group, many common observations were expressed. The experience led participants to accept the focus group methodology as an excellent forum for providing information to decision-makers before a program begins. (Adjunct ERIC Clearinghouse on Literacy Education) (Author/LB)

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FOCUS GROUP USED IN MODEL CONCEPTUALIZATION: THE IDEAL ENGLISH AS A SECOND LANGUAGE PROGRAM

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Running Head: Focus Groups in English as Second Language

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FOCUS GROUP USED IN MODEL CONCEPTUALIZATION: THE IDEAL ENGLISH AS A SECOND LANGUAGE PROGRAM

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Abstract

The purpose of this focus group design was to identify the needs of students in English as a Second Language (ESL) Programs for use by researchers, program designers and teachers. In order to be of use to a wide range of ESL programs for adults, the recruitment of participants is encouraged from a variety of programs. Additionally, from the pilot run of this design, it seems a diversity of motivation and academic background on the part of the students seemed to be an important characteristic. The pilot focus group was made up of students preparing to take the Test of English as a Foreign Language. The participants were not from the same program and all had various levels of formal training. They were asked to conceptualize the ideal English as a Second Language Course. Despite the cultural diversity within this group, many common observations were expressed. This experience lead participants to accept the focus group methodology as an excellent forum for providing information to decision makers before a program begins. Cultural diversity in the pilot was interesting but not determined to be salient.

INTRODUCTION

English as Second Language (ESL) programs have unique problems in their instructional designs and models of teaching. In discussing the difficulties in evaluating ESL programs, Robertson (1983) has brought up the diversity of features inherent in ESL. In dealing with such a diversity, the needs of the students may be given low priority. One of the purposes of a focus group is to bring out the underlying concerns of program participants (Krueger, 1988). It would seem to follow logically that the focus group would be effective in the development of English as Second Language programs.

An important part of the development of ESL or any other program is model conceptualization. According to Trochim and Linton (1984) procedures in structured conceptualization should be easily defined and leading to a useful representation. Focus groups can be very helpful here. In the design of the focus group the process steps are delineated and in the final transcript, the requirement for a representational form is met (Trochim and Linton, 1984). Since the goal of the focus group is to draw out the feelings, ideas and perceptions of participants (Bers, 1989), the perspective origins are addressed (Trochim and Linton, 1984). Focus groups would seem to be appropriate for model conceptualization.

According to Bers (1989) erroneous assumptions about focus groups can be avoided by understanding the

elementaries of focus groups. The common elements of the various definitions include: small homogeneous group; a trained moderator; discussion for 90 to 120 minutes in a non-threatening environment; a selected topic (Bers, 1989). The nature of focus groups calls for them to be self managing (Morgan, 1988). Important to this approach is the need to legitimize the participants' right to manage themselves and the encouragement of individualized expressions (Morgan, 1988).

CENTER OF FOCUS GROUP STUDY

The center of this study was to design a focus group that could be used by not only researchers and developers of general programs, but also by teachers who want to improve their own specific programs. This design is along the lines of a program evaluation, but with the program being the ideal model visualized by participants. This approach is analogous to the use of a focus group by a company that wants to improve an existing product. Such a company would invite consumers familiar with the product to a focus group with the purpose of conceptualizing the characteristics of the perfected product.

After designing the focus group, a pilot study was done to determine the strengths and weaknesses of the design. The report of the implementation of that pilot study is given along with the results. Following

Krueger's guidelines (1988) a "rigorous" approach was attempted but trusting in the robustness of the focus group technique flexible adaptations were allowed. This flexibility proved to be advantageous and is encouraged.

RATIONALE FOR FOCUS GROUP

This design for the focus group has been formulated to provide a generalizable needs analysis for any English as Second Language (ESL) Program. It assumes that the teachers and designers of ESL programs need to know not only the traditional models of teaching, but also the expectations and perceptions of the participants. By understanding the thoughts and expectations of program participants, teachers and designers of ESL programs can better personalize programs to help students reach higher individual achievement.

PURPOSE

The purpose of this focus group design is a needs assessment of the typical ESL program in an effort to create a model of the ideal program. This design would be a tool in the analysis of the perceptions and expectations of participants of various programs as these feelings relate to the model of an ideal program. The purpose of the analysis of the data is to look for any previously unrecognized needs generalizable to the majority of ESL programs. This analysis would be the foundation for developing a program considerate of the needs of participants.

GOALS OF THE FOCUS GROUP

The goals of this focus group design are to develop items which have much agreement among participants. These items should be clear expressions of the positive aspects of the model program (as determined by the focus group's collected experience). Also there should be an appropriate number of clearly expressed deficiencies in the existing model that need to be addressed in order to achieve a model of an ideal program. Appropriate issues for the focus group would include: the effectiveness of current programs, the deficiencies of current programs in helping student achievement, concerns of students that are not met through the current model but could be hoped for in a "best of all possible worlds" situation.

PROGRAM DESCRIPTION

The program that this focus group design addresses exists only in the minds of the participants. Though a broad ranged generalizeability of the focus group results would be desired, certain qualifications have to be made in regards to the kind of program best served by these results. This qualified program would be a program having adult learners, but not necessarily a college oriented program. The program should be broad enough to accept the student from a wide range of proficiency: the student who has minimal competence in English communication, through the student who may have some academic training overseas, to the student who needs a

little "brush up". The program should be able to accommodate students with various reasons for learning (e.g. getting a job or attending college). The program should follow accepted models of teaching. In line with this the teacher would need to be "certifiable", i.e. he/she should have the appropriate education and experience necessary to teach the class whether the state requires formal certification or not. Also, the program needs to be "accreditable", i.e. it should meet acceptable guidelines for an adult education class whether or not the state requires accreditation for this sort of class.

METHODOLOGY

The recruiting of participants is to be done through a random selection of students of adult ESL programs. Care will be taken to assure that various settings of schools for adults are represented. Students should be selected from various levels of achievement. The number of students per focus group will be limited to less than ten, but effort needs to be made to keep the groups to equal numbers.

The groups are to be self managing. The group moderator will be present but sitting separated from the group. The moderator will give instructions and introduction to the purpose of the focus group following the guidelines of instructing a self-managing focus group outlined by Morgan (1988, p 51-53). Important to this

approach is the need to legitimize the participants' right to manage themselves and the encouragement of individualized expressions.

FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS

Question #1: Whether or not you feel your current program needs improvement, is it effective? Under this question, secondary questions would include:

a) Are you learning and improving in your study of practical English?

b) Do you have confidence that eventually you can reach your desired level of proficiency by continuing in your current program?

Question #2: What are some of the deficiencies of your current program? Secondary questions in this category would be:

a) What is needed in order for you to achieve your goals more quickly and effectively?

b) Are your individual concerns and needs addressed in your current program?

Question #3: From your experience, are there any ways your current program could be redesigned to meet the needs expressed here?

Question #4: Do you feel that any of the needs expressed here could not be met through a redesign of the program?

IMPLEMENTATION OF PILOT STUDY

The participants in the pilot focus group were recruited through personal invitation. Beforehand,

nation of origin and type of program involved in were determined as was each person's familiarity with other participants. It was desired that participants would not be familiar with each other before the meeting. Also, a variety of curricular experiences and nationalities were desired. In the end, there were six participants from three different countries. They were participating in four different programs: college based class; private tutor; private school; adult class at public school.

RESULTS OF PILOT FOCUS GROUP

Positive Points of Current Programs

*1. There are good opportunities to learn about American culture and history.

2. Conversation practice is encouraged.

3. All participants expressed a strong desire to learn English.

4. Teacher seems very professional.

5. Improvement in English proficiency was noted by all; all had confidence to improve proficiency within their current program.

6. Compared to college course in home country, current course is more practical.

7. Cooperation among students exists in the program increasing effectiveness on the individual level and on the program level.

Expressions of Program Needs

*1. Course divisions: conversation, interrogation skills, writing, grammar- need to be clearly defined; there is too much overlap.

2. There is a too big student-to-teacher ratio. There needs to be smaller classes.

3. For this program to be a high intensity course there needs to be more time in class.

*4. There needs to be more natural conversation with native speakers based on mutual interests to broaden vocabulary.

5. For those preparing for college study, there should be less emphasis on conversation, more on reading and writing skills needed for college studies.

6. Studying English in America can be a financial burden.

This is obviously a paraphrasing of what was expressed, however the essence of all statements made has been retained. An analysis of the results reveals three different clusters of statements: 1) positive points of the collected experience, 2) needs to be addressed for improvements, 3) possible means to achieve improvements. The asterisked items were made by two different participants. There seemed to be no effort to argue any point even when one point was in contradiction to a previous statement. Some items (needs #5 and #6) were individual expressions that were neither supported nor contradicted by the others. When the moderator made the suggestion that more programs in the local area may be needed as a synthesis of two ideas (needs #2 and #3) there was general agreement. This idea would be considered as a "means to the ideal" expression as would the emphasis on mutual interests in natural conversation if the study design were followed more closely. This was only the pilot of a study design using a focus group.

Focus group data are not considered empirical. They are usually used to determine the direction of further study.

COMMENTARY

Though the focus group was designed to be self managing it was evident from the start that the moderator would need to take an active part in the discussion. The moderator explained the purpose of the focus group and how the discussion could be self-managed, but after giving the focus group questions as topics of discussion the group sat silent until one participant gave a short incomplete answer to the first question. His answer was directed to the moderator as his only audience. The moderator encouraged him to clarify his answer and express why it was personally meaningful to him; the participant expanded his comment. After he finished, every participant would look to the moderator for permission before speaking. One participant arrived late and the moderator pretended everyone had already expressed an opinion and asked his point of view. (In reality, there had been a long silence and he was only the second one to speak). He freely spoke thinking that everyone had already contributed something.

Out of the six participants, three were actively involved in the discussion. However, all three did look for permission to speak the first time. The remaining three spoke clearly when called upon. These more passive ones did have something very valid to contribute but they

saved it until they were personally asked for their opinion. It is interesting to note that the one active participant saved a key point of concern until after the group was dismissed and the tape recorder was turned off.

In analyzing the discussion it was noted that often a key statement could be gleaned from either one person's opinion or from the discussion between two participants. Some participants felt there were more negative statements made than positive, but in reality there were nine positive statements made to eight expressions of needs (the perceived negative statements). However, these needs expressions are not necessarily complaints or criticisms and should not have been considered negative in any way. There were two statements on how the needs could be met.

The results of this pilot focus group demonstrate two key points. The design can yield valuable information to a program designer if recruitment and self management were followed more closely than in the pilot study. Such information could help a teacher be more aware of the needs of the student in an ESL program. The results of the pilot study also demonstrated that direction to further research can be adequately drawn from focus groups.

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